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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-eighth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 516TH MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 13 October 1997 at 10 a.m.

Temporary Chairman: Mr. MCHUMO (United Republic of Tanzania)

Chairman: Mr. SKOGMO (Norway)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.35 a.m.

OPENING OF THE SESSION (agenda item 1)

1. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN declared open the forty-eighth session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme.

STATEMENT BY THE OUTGOING CHAIRMAN

2. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN, speaking as Chairman of the forty-seventh session, said that the Office of the High Commissioner had rarely faced such enormous and complex challenges. The scope of its work had changed almost beyond recognition in recent years. It worked in regions affected by turbulence and conflict, and faced problems having complex causes in the countries from which refugees fled and far-reaching consequences in the countries where they sought refuge. Over the last year, the Executive Committee and its Standing Committee had grappled with many dilemmas, including those faced by developing countries hosting refugees, those faced by refugees seeking asylum or repatriating to countries devastated by war and those faced by humanitarian aid workers active in the midst of conflict. Those issues would, no doubt, be among the issues of concern to the Executive Committee at the present session. He congratulated the High Commissioner on the leadership she had provided to UNHCR in responding to those challenges.

3. During his tenure as Chairman of the Executive Committee, he had been impressed by its true humanitarian spirit, its tradition of consensus and the transparency of its relations with UNHCR. Those relations would be all the more precious in the challenging year ahead, in which UNHCR faced diminishing resources and high demands and expectations. He left the office of Chairman with the hope that the humanitarian solidarity the Executive Committee manifested would be further strengthened for the benefit of refugees and the often hard-pressed countries that hosted them.

4. He expressed deep gratitude to the Executive Committee for giving him the honour to serve it, which had been both a personal honour and an expression of recognition for Tanzania's modest role in giving asylum to millions of refugees over the years. He paid a tribute to the High Commissioner and thanked the UNHCR staff and the secretariat and outgoing Bureau for their support in the past year.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS (agenda item 2)

5. Mr. FOULKES (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) nominated Mr. Skogmo (Norway) for the office of Chairman.

6. Mr. BAUTISTA (Philippines), Mr. VERGNE SABOIA (Brazil) and Mr. MORJANE (Tunisia) seconded the nomination.

7. Mr. Skogmo (Norway) was elected Chairman by acclamation.

8. Mr. MONTENEGRO MALLONA (Nicaragua) nominated Mr. Rodriguez Cedeño (Venezuela) for the office of Vice-Chairman.

9. Mr. PEREZ HERNANDEZ (Spain) and Mr. AKRAM (Pakistan) seconded the nomination.

10. Mr. Rodriguez Cedeño (Venezuela) was elected Vice-Chairman by acclamation.

11. Mr. SELEBI (South Africa) nominated Mr. Irumba (Uganda) for the office of Rapporteur.

12. Mr. GARNJANA-GOONCHORN (Thailand) seconded the nomination.

13. Mr. Irumba (Uganda) was elected Rapporteur by acclamation.

14. Mr. Skogmo (Norway) took the Chair.

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

15. The CHAIRMAN said that, although some long-standing civil wars had been settled during the past year while others were moving slowly towards peaceful solutions and democracy had taken root worldwide, over 30 civil wars and other conflicts were still in progress and there were 23 million people of concern to UNHCR, half of them refugees. Areas of concern included the Great Lakes and other regions of Africa, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the former Yugoslavia. Currently, more refugees were fleeing from civil conflicts than from traditional wars and forced displacement within countries was becoming more common. Wars, persecution and massive human rights abuses all produced refugees; however, as in the Great Lakes region, they could also make it more difficult to separate refugees from former soldiers and those guilty of genocide.

16. Those developments involved disturbing trends. Increasingly, people were fleeing not only from, but also into, situations of insecurity. Refugees and asylum seekers were often seen as a burden and a potential threat to national and regional stability and countries were growing reluctant to open their borders. The problem of diminishing respect for the fundamental principles of humanitarian protection concerned not only the High Commissioner and her Office, but also the member States of the Executive Committee, which should reaffirm their support for the core principles of global protection. The undermining of humanitarian principles entailed greater risk, not only for refugees and displaced persons, but also for international humanitarian workers and local staff, a problem to which, as Chairman, he planned to pay particular attention.

17. During the past year, there had been efforts to improve coordination between humanitarian agencies and between those agencies and the United Nations system. The Secretary-General's reform package was currently before the General Assembly and the new structures for inter-agency cooperation were not fully in place, while the impact of United Nations reform on the governing bodies of humanitarian agencies, including the Committee itself, had not yet been determined. Member States had a right to expect good coordination between United Nations agencies and he was certain that the new coordination structures, once established, would be fully implemented by those agencies. The Standing Committee would doubtless wish to be briefed on, and

to discuss, the implementation of those reforms. However, he hoped that the Executive Committee would then be able to turn to the political challenges which the High Commissioner and her staff had too often had to face alone. In cooperation with United Nations political bodies, the Committee must consider ways to provide greater political support for the Organization's conflict management efforts. The financing of humanitarian operations, particularly those associated with "forgotten" conflicts, was another source of great concern which should be addressed by the Standing Committee and donor Governments in the coming year.

18. The working methods and consensual culture of the Executive Committee and its Standing Committee, as well as the cooperation provided by the secretariat, were assets to be preserved and the Committee had found a good balance between its discussion of regional situations, administrative and housekeeping matters and thematic issues such as the situation of refugee women and children, which deserved its special attention. He planned to work closely with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which were not only implementing partners in the field, but also advocates of the cause of refugees in the media and a source of political support at the national level. During the coming year, NGOs would be permitted to participate in the work of the Standing Committee on a trial basis and he was confident of their commitment and sense of responsibility. Lastly, he emphasized that the Executive Committee's primary task was to support and further strengthen UNHCR, which under Mrs. Ogata's leadership, was one of the best-led and best-managed of the world's intergovernmental institutions.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (agenda item 3) (A/AC.96/XLVIII/L.1)

19. The agenda was adopted.

ANNUAL THEME: REPATRIATION CHALLENGES (agenda item 4) (A/AC.96/887)

Introductory statement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

20. Mrs. OGATA (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that most of the previous year's trends had continued. As of January 1997, there had been 1.3 million fewer refugees than in early 1996 and she hoped that, during a period of declining emergencies, it would be possible to focus on solving long-standing refugee situations, primarily through repatriation. Economic difficulties in regions with a tradition of long-term asylum were making host countries less willing to accept refugees. While resettlement remained an option for smaller groups of refugees and in sensitive situations, repatriation was the primary solution and she welcomed the Executive Committee's decision to take that issue as its annual theme.

21. The African continent had both the largest number of refugees and the highest number of returnees. She hoped that the July 1997 elections in Liberia would facilitate the repatriation of some of that country's 500,000 refugees and commended the hospitality provided to them by West African countries, particularly Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. As of September 1997, almost all the 300,000 refugees who had fled Togo in 1993 had returned. In Western Sahara, peace negotiations led by the Secretary-General's personal

envoy had paved the way for the return of Sahraoui refugees from Algeria and Mauritania. If the planned return of 150,000 Malian refugees by late 1997 was completed, it would be possible to concentrate on reintegration activities in that country. Nearly 65,000 refugees had returned to Ethiopia from the Sudan and, despite the uncertain political situation in Angola, 114,000 of that country's 300,000 refugees had returned spontaneously. A successful UNHCR pilot repatriation project had helped 10,000 Somalis to return home from Ethiopia and had prompted thousands of others to return spontaneously.

22. A peace agreement signed in June 1997 had led to the return of 6,600 refugees from Afghanistan to Tajikistan. However, she was concerned about the safety of 7,000 Tajik refugees, currently in Sakhi camp in northern Afghanistan, whose repatriation was blocked by nearby fighting. She called on the parties to that conflict to allow the refugees to return by the shortest route through Uzbekistan and welcomed the cooperation of the Uzbek Government in that regard. Over 20,000 internally displaced Chechens had returned home from the Russian Federation. The 100,000 refugees who had fled northern Iraq in late 1996 had returned, but the situation of the Turkish refugees of Kurdish origin remained unsolved. Military attacks on humanitarian convoys were hindering the delivery of assistance to northern Iraq. During the past year, 24,000 refugees had returned to Myanmar from Bangladesh and UNHCR was negotiating with the Government of Bangladesh to find a solution for the remaining 21,000 refugees who did not wish to return. As of the return of Hong Kong to China in June 1997, the number of Vietnamese refugees in that territory had dropped from 214,000 to fewer than 2,000. The UNHCR repatriation operation in Guatemala would probably be concluded by the end of the current year and 2,500 Guatemalan refugees were being considered for naturalization in Mexico.

23. Those successes showed that solutions to refugee problems and, in particular, voluntary repatriation, were possible. However, difficult challenges remained in other parts of the world. In Afghanistan, civil conflict and restrictions on human rights, particularly those of women, had virtually halted the repatriation of the world's single largest group of refugees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. Organized repatriation in Eritrea was deadlocked, threats to the security of Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda continued and there had been not only an interruption in the repatriation of refugees to Sierra Leone, but a renewed exodus of refugees from that country after its elected Government had been deposed. Political stalemate was also blocking the return from Nepal of 90,000 Bhutanese refugees. Two new refugee situations involved the flight of over 40,000 Cambodians into Thailand and that of thousands of refugees from the Republic of the Congo to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

24. The greatest challenges had occurred in the Great Lakes region; between 1994 and 1996, UNHCR had assisted over 1.5 million Rwandans living in camps in Tanzania and the former Zaire. The primary problem was the international community's failure to separate those who deserved international protection from those who did not, ensuring the physical security of the former and preventing the latter from committing violent attacks on both nationals and refugees. Unfortunately, UNHCR efforts to prevent the conflict in that region from engulfing the Kivu provinces and refugee camps had failed. After the destruction of those camps, 600,000 Rwandans had returned home over

a period of a few days; some weeks later, virtually all the Rwandans in Tanzania had returned home and those remaining in the former Zaire had fled westwards and dispersed into the forests. A UNHCR request for an international military force to assist in rescuing refugees had not been met and, although rescue operations conducted, often in conflict zones, by UNHCR in cooperation with other United Nations agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and NGOs had allowed another 250,000 Rwandans to return, dozens of others had died in the forests of hunger, exhaustion and disease or at the hands of the military. Surviving Rwandans were scattered in 11 central African countries, including the Republic of the Congo, where fighting made rescue operations increasingly difficult.

25. The 2 million Rwandans who had returned home since 1994 must be reintegrated into the country if peace was to be restored. Activities in that regard included a memorandum of understanding between UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the establishment of a joint unit between those organizations and the Rwandan Government and environmental and other programmes in areas of Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo where refugee camps had been located.

26. In Burundi, where there had been little progress towards peace, UNHCR had not promoted repatriation, but had assisted the spontaneous return of refugees, in many cases from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Government of Tanzania and UNHCR had recently conducted a joint mission to assess the implications of the presence of the Tanzanian refugee camps, which currently housed 230,000 Burundians, for the security and stability of the area. That mission had recommended that law and order in the camps should be improved in order to avoid events such as those which had occurred in the former Zaire in 1996. A few weeks previously, UNHCR had begun cooperating with the Governments of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania in the process of repatriating over 70,000 Congolese refugees by boat across Lake Tanganyika.

27. The repatriation process had confronted UNHCR with excruciating dilemmas such as the choice between repatriating Rwandans to unsafe areas in the rest of that country and leaving them to almost certain death in the forests. There had been military attacks on refugee sites and refugees were being subjected to gross human rights abuses and violence. Moreover, UNHCR access to refugees was frequently limited or denied and its proposals to identify and protect those with valid reasons for not returning and to exclude those who did not qualify for international protection had been implemented only in Malawi and the Central African Republic, where eligibility had been determined by the Governments of those countries. It had become increasingly difficult, if not impossible to monitor refugees in the region and several humanitarian workers had been killed. The violation of human rights and humanitarian principles had become a pattern in the Great Lakes region, as shown by the expulsion of Rwandan asylum-seekers from the Goma area a few days previously. While UNHCR was concerned by that trend, which had compelled it to suspend its activities on behalf of Rwandan refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it was also aware that armed groups and political extremists operating from within large refugee populations contributed to the instability of the region.

28. Those developments did not imply a need to revise basic principles. The rights of refugees to asylum and non-refoulement were the foundation of the UNHCR mandate and UNHCR's commitment to defend and promote them was non-negotiable. However, those principles must be implemented in constructive, realistic and creative ways that took account of the legitimate concerns of States. The balance between principles and interests was a complex one, especially in situations of mass displacement across lines of conflict, but there were lessons to be learned.

29. Some of the current problems could have been avoided if States had fulfilled their responsibilities, as the Executive Committee had urged them to do. Refugee camps should have been located well away from border areas, armed elements and political extremists should not have been allowed to live with and control refugees and those guilty of crimes against humanity should have been brought to justice. Repeated UNHCR proposals in that regard had been ignored and it was that fact, rather than a failure in the underlying principles, which had led to further insecurity and conflict. If the apparent contradictions between humanitarian principles and State interests were not resolved, countless innocent people would suffer. She therefore proposed a cooperative effort between UNHCR and States, regional organizations and, in particular, the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Her Office was willing to discuss with Governments practical measures for facilitating respect for humanitarian principles while taking account of their concerns and hoped that States, in turn, would make concrete proposals in that regard and, above all, that they would reaffirm their commitment to those principles.

30. Although the crisis in the application of fundamental principles had recently manifested itself most visibly in the Great Lakes region, it was not limited to any particular area and she was seriously concerned about the increasingly restrictive trend in asylum policies in many Western countries. While recognizing that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between refugees and economic migrants, she stressed the need to preserve the distinction and assured States of the Office's willingness to cooperate in doing so, within agreed parameters. In that connection, she noted that, in many Western countries, the concept of temporary protection had been successfully applied to refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The distinction made in Bosnia and Herzegovina between "majority areas" and "minority areas" had shown the usefulness of the concept of temporary protection as a flexible tool for applying humanitarian principles, with due consideration for the legitimate concerns of States. She also welcomed the initiative taken by the European Commission for the adoption of common standards on temporary protection in Europe.

31. During the past year, the Office had grappled with the need to develop a comprehensive approach to the transition from war to peace as part of the United Nations system-wide search for a strategy known as post-conflict peace building, within which UNHCR's role was to ensure the return and reintegration of uprooted populations.

32. As a result of the efforts it had made in recent years to reinforce its emergency preparedness and response capacity, UNHCR had also acquired expertise and the ability to deal with both organized and massive spontaneous returns. Repatriation was, however, not just a logistical operation; it had

to be integrated into a wider process that included the restoration of basic human rights and the judicial system, which would greatly benefit from enhanced cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Reintegration required a comprehensive package of approaches ranging from physical reconstruction to political, social, educational, psychological and protection measures. In some situations, it also included the clearance of landmines and she took the opportunity to welcome the award of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

33. The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina exemplified the variety of challenges UNHCR had been tackling to make repatriation successful and sustainable. Since the signature of the Dayton Agreement, close to 183,000 refugees were estimated to have returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that had helped to reduce the problem of displacement caused by the war. However, the prevailing pattern of return had been to the so-called majority areas, where the main challenge had been to accelerate physical reconstruction. Efforts to encourage returns to minority areas had involved a package of initiatives, including inter-Entity bus lines, the designation of "Open Cities" to encourage grass-root acceptance of minority returns and "Twin City" arrangements calling on the solidarity of host communities in countries of asylum. In addition, more positive measures had recently been announced by the Government of Croatia to favour return and reconciliation among all Croats.

34. However, several conditions had to be met if minority returns were to occur. Physical safety had to be ensured and the Stabilization Force (SFOR), whose security umbrella would be required beyond the current deadline of June 1998, and the International Police Task Force (IPTF) had an essential role to play in that regard; authorities and political parties would have to respect the voice of the legitimate electorate; the right to housing and other social amenities would have to be guaranteed and the problem of unemployment addressed. Although UNHCR's efforts in those areas could be only modest and complementary, they provided a useful indication of the direction in which it should move in order to promote the necessary transition from return to reintegration.

35. In Rwanda and Bosnia, the two societies where the wounds of conflict and hatred were deepest, UNHCR had expanded its special initiatives for women refugees because of its conviction that supporting women's self-sufficiency and developing their role in society was the key to promoting tolerance and overcoming community divisions. In Georgia and Ukraine, UNHCR had helped to rebuild destroyed houses and rehabilitate the social infrastructure and was assisting the authorities to deal with questions of citizenship in order to avert a potential statelessness situation.

36. The scope and complexity of a comprehensive approach to the reintegration of returnees required closer cooperation with a wide range of partners and, in particular, with UNHCR's multilateral partners and development-oriented NGOs, which would build on activities initiated by UNHCR. When disengaging from reintegration activities, her Office had to take account of the specific requirements of each situation. She committed it to a better understanding of its multilateral partners in order to develop common approaches and ensure the orderly and timely phasing out of humanitarian

assistance. Traditional cooperation with other United Nations agencies, such as the World Food Programme and the United Nations Childrens Fund, had been supplemented by close operational cooperation at the country level with the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and, since July 1997, the International Monetary Fund.

37. The most difficult and challenging task, which ultimately completed any repatriation, was the achievement of reconciliation. As the successive crises in Rwanda and Burundi had shown for the past 35 years, in the absence of reconciliation, returnees would remain in divided communities in which conflict could again erupt. In addition to supporting activities to foster reconciliation, UNHCR should help to mainstream them. Efforts towards inter-communal dialogue were not abstract goals. Concrete examples could be found in the women's initiatives already referred to, in the joint child and adolescent initiative in Liberia, which would bring former child combatants back to normal life, in the "Open Cities" initiative in Bosnia and in the restoration and strengthening of the judicial system in Rwanda.

38. UNHCR would also continue to cooperate with inter-governmental and regional bodies such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Southern African Development Community and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Desertification in the Horn of Africa, in order to promote reconciliation by establishing legal and administrative frameworks to manage refugee and returnee flows.

39. Despite funding constraints, UNHCR was committed to the process of the follow-up to the CIS Conference, through which considerable progress had been made in developing legal structures to address refugee flows and building awareness of population displacement in the region. Steps had also been taken to establish a forum for regional consultations on the problems of refugees and displaced persons in Central Asia, South West Asia and the Middle East, the first of which had taken place in March 1997 in Amman, Jordan.

40. She concluded her remarks on repatriation and reintegration challenges by referring to UNHCR's cooperation with the European Union, with which it consulted regularly to build and strengthen its partnership in standard setting, policy making and operational cooperation.

41. Human resources were the mainstay of UNHCR's mission and operations. In September 1997, UNHCR had launched the Career Management System to optimize the utilization of staff resources while simultaneously enhancing the Office's support for career planning, individual objective setting and performance evaluation.

42. The introduction of the Career Management System was closely linked to the two-year-old Change Management Exercise, which continued to be one of her priorities. In addition to a number of changes in the areas of new technologies and human resources, she had appointed a Director for Change who was responsible for ensuring that all actions grouped under Project Delphi were prioritized and well coordinated. UNHCR's staff also had to be mobilized to increase ownership of the process and conclude the current phase of the Change Management Exercise.

43. With regard to financial resources, she expressed her gratitude for the support given by donor Governments to most of the special operations in which the Office was involved, including in the Great Lakes region and the former Yugoslavia. However, increased financial support also had to be provided to other, less visible special programmes, in particular in Angola, Liberia and Tajikistan. Support had to be given for core activities covered by the General Programme, which was still seriously underfunded in 1997, with a shortfall of approximately $50 million. She also called for greater efforts to support the General Programme in 1998 adequately and in a timely way. She was pleased to report that the decline in the number of large-scale emergencies and the trend towards solutions would entail a substantial decrease in UNHCR's overall budget, which, for the first time since 1991, was likely to be lower than $1 billion in 1998. However, she emphasized that repatriation was resource-intensive, particularly in staff terms, and welcomed the proposal that UNHCR should reconsider how it classified its staff costs in order to ensure that those essential to the discharge of its mandate were properly recognized.

44. She expressed her deep concern for the safety and security of staff working in conflict areas, where both national and international staff were exposed not only to the stress of working in dangerous situations, but to the threats arising out of actual conflict. There had been casualties and she took the opportunity to pay tribute to all staff members of UNHCR and other agencies, especially the International Committee of the Red Cross and NGOs, who had lost their lives or suffered in the service of refugees and displaced persons. National staff were particularly vulnerable and would remain so for as long as unarmed civilian aid workers worked alone in the forefront of humanitarian disasters. UNHCR had conducted in-depth reviews of staff safety issues and she called on Governments to show understanding and increased support in view of the resource implications of improving security measures.

45. UNHCR had been closely involved in the debate led by the Secretary-General on the United Nations reform process. She hoped that the transformation of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs into a more streamlined, focused and efficient Office of the Emergency Relief Coordinator would become effective as soon as possible. She renewed her own personal commitment and that of her Office to respond in an effective, timely and creative manner to the challenges facing them.

46. Ms. OAKLEY (United States of America) expressed her Government's appreciation for the difficult and sometimes dangerous work carried out by UNHCR staff and its and her own personal esteem for the High Commissioner's continuing leadership, dedication and activism.

47. She appreciated the choice of repatriation challenges as the theme for the current session of the Executive Committee and congratulated UNHCR for producing an excellent and thought-provoking paper for discussion (A/AC.96/887). After another year in which large numbers of refugees had returned home in less than ideal situations, in both Rwanda and Bosnia, the choice of that topic was timely.

48. With more and more countries throughout the world reluctant to continue to receive and host mass influxes of refugees for long periods of time, there

was enormous pressure to repatriate refugees as quickly as possible. In the Great Lakes region, the norms of refugee protection and organized, voluntary repatriation had been severely tested and, in some instances, overturned. The plans the international community had been developing, all too slowly, had been swept away by the mass returns - 685,000 from Zaire and 500,000 from Tanzania - which had gone better than imagined owing to the efforts of UNHCR, other organizations and the Government of Rwanda, whose efforts she complimented. She was concerned, however, about the continuing tension between UNHCR and Rwanda and assured both of her Government's continued commitment to and support for their reintegration and rehabilitation programmes.

49. Unfortunately, the civil war in Zaire had pushed many refugees, often used as hostages by armed factions, further west. The lack of access to those people, the reported attacks against them and their continued refoulement were of great concern. The expulsion of Rwandans and Burundians from the transit centre in Kisangani and the more recent expulsions from Goma were the latest episodes seriously to undercut the ability of UNHCR to carry out its protection mandate in Central Africa. Those tragic events had served no one's fundamental interests. The task at hand, however, was not to assign blame for past action or inaction, but to agree on policies to move forward in pursuit of humanitarian goals.

50. Turning to the specific theme of repatriation challenges, she acknowledged that UNHCR had had to make extremely difficult choices. The High Commissioner's recent briefing to the Security Council in New York had laid out the dilemma facing UNHCR: that of helping people move from one life-threatening situation to another just slightly less dangerous. The challenges listed in the paper under review were real and might become the rule rather than the exception. Refugee-receiving countries, countries of origin and donor countries must work together to meet them.

51. While many were sceptical about the concept of "burden-sharing", her Government believed that refugees were an international responsibility. All must work together to lessen the impact of massive influxes of refugees on the countries of asylum and to provide UNHCR with political as well as financial support. UNHCR could, moreover, not be expected to do police and security work which it was neither mandated nor equipped to do.

52. UNHCR could carry out its mandate only if States fulfilled their responsibilities. Countries of asylum must uphold and support respect for humanitarian and human rights principles and assist in establishing and maintaining a firm separation between armed elements and the refugee population. Camps should be located well away from border areas to prevent them from being used by armed elements as bases for cross-border attacks or the targets of retaliatory attacks. It was in the interest of countries of asylum to allow UNHCR immediate access to refugee populations, thereby enabling it to identify and register refugees properly and to establish and organize camps rapidly.

53. Perhaps the most important question posed in the paper on repatriation challenges (A/AC.96/887) was "Under what conditions should UNHCR involve

itself in return to situations where effective national protection cannot be fully ensured ...?". The first principle and priority for both UNHCR and the international community should be to make every effort to work together with countries of asylum to ensure that respect for the principle of non-refoulement, which the United States was prepared to support, both in public and in private, in the strongest possible terms. However, when forcible return was imminent, the best course for UNHCR was to do its best to assist and protect and to make the hard choices based on each individual situation, even if its only choice was between the lesser of two evils. However, that did not mean that UNHCR should change its policy on return. The principle of voluntary repatriation as the cornerstone of the international refugee protection regime should be upheld and fought for.

54. UNHCR was playing a critical role as a catalyst for safe and dignified returns to Bosnia. For her Government, the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons, especially minority return, was one of the highest priorities. More than 1.6 million Bosnians were still displaced and her delegation called on other donors to support UNHCR's efforts by contributing to its appeal and funding complementary programmes under the "Open Cities" initiative.

55. Her delegation was pleased to note that the paper on repatriation (A/AC.96/887) contained a section on reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction, which were essential to ensure that repatriation was durable. Humanitarian and development agencies, donor Governments, the World Bank, NGOs, officials of the country of origin and refugees themselves had to come together to create a plan of action that would integrate all facets in the continuum from relief to development, which should be simultaneous rather than consecutive. Activities to promote the reconstruction of economic and social services and to restore political and judicial structures were perhaps a task for which the new Emergency Relief Coordinator would be ideally suited.

56. Her Government welcomed UNHCR's efforts to systematize its relations with other organizations through memoranda of understanding. Although repatriation could happen quickly without sufficient time to plan a coordinated approach, when such an approach was possible, as had been the case in Bosnia, much could be done. Although the ultimate success of the operation in Bosnia remained to be seen, concrete efforts were being taken to restore a viable society and to bring war criminals to justice. Reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction were not sustainable without reconciliation. Although UNHCR had an interest in seeing that reconciliation took place, responsibility for it lay with other players, such as the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the international tribunals, with which UNHCR could cooperate, as it had done, through the "Open Cities" initiative. In that connection, she also referred to the Bosnian Women's initiative, which her Government and others had launched with UNHCR. Women in Bosnia were determined to build a society in which they would have a role to play in making the right decisions in the future. She was particularly pleased that UNHCR had launched a similar initiative in Rwanda.

57. One opportunity that was perhaps not being made the most of was helping refugees to be better prepared for their return home and better trained and ready to participate in the reconstruction of their communities and their

country. In that respect, her delegation was pleased that UNHCR was making greater efforts to meet the needs of refugee children, whose education was an opportunity that could not be missed. The extent of UNHCR's involvement in reintegration largely depended on the early participation of other international and non-governmental organizations. Her delegation supported UNHCR's quick impact projects (QIPs), which were a source of immediate assistance to returnees.

58. In closing, she said that no one had easy answers to the questions raised in the paper on repatriation challenges (A/AC.96/887), which had to be taken up by all. She congratulated the High Commissioner and her staff on the dedicated and principled manner in which they confronted the challenges facing them and expressed her confidence that they would meet them.

The meeting rose at 12.25 a.m.